THE TRANSCAUCASIAN MAZE

In Tiflis I plunged into Caucasian politics. Through the centuries the Caucasus had been the arena of clashes between different civilizations, feuding empires, and local kingdoms and tribes. Russia did not establish herself firmly in Transcaucasia until the second half of the nineteenth century. She built highways, the ports of Baku on the Caspian Sea and Batum on the Black Sea, and a railroad and a pipeline between them. She introduced civil administration and courts and developed a network of schools designed to Russify the population. But the bulk of the people—small farmers, artisans, and merchants—preserved their old languages, religions,[1] customs, and garb. Except for a dozen Moslem tribes in the mountains, the region south of the Caucasian range was divided into three parts—not unlike Gaul in the time of Julius Caesar. The Georgians (some two million) lived in the western part along the range; the Tartars (about three million) east of them, closer to the Caspian Sea; and the Armenians (two million) further south, along the Turkish border.

At the elections to the Constituent Assembly, the Tartars voted for the national Moslem party, which was controlled by the big landowners and clergy, while the Armenians and Georgians cast votes for moderate Socialists—the Armenians for the Dashnak party (close to the Russian S-R), the Georgians for the S-D Mensheviks. All three groups had declined to recognize the November coup in Petrograd and formed a government of their own—the Transcaucasian Commissariat, based on representation of all national groups and parties in the region. Originally, this was to be a temporary arrangement, but the split between Transcaucasia and Russia became deeper after the Communists dissolved the Constituent Assembly. Political conditions in Transcaucasia were aggravated by frictions among the three national groups, especially between the Armenians and Tartars. When we reached Tiflis, Transcaucasia, split and defenseless, lay at the mercy of Turkey.

At the outbreak of the March revolution Russia had an army of two hundred thousand men on the Turkish front. At the beginning of the war, this army had penetrated deeply into Asia Minor and occupied the northwestern corner of Turkey, including Trebizond (now Trabzon). The positions of the Russian and Turkish armies did not change until the November coup in Petrograd, when the Russian

[1] Christianity spread among the Georgians and Armenians a thousand years earlier than in Russia. Both peoples belonged to the Eastern group of Christian churches, but formed separate denominations, different from the Russian Orthodox Church in ritual, organization, and tradition.